

September 13, 2004

**HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT (HSR&D) SERVICE
PROGRAM ANNOUNCEMENT:**

HSR&D MERIT REVIEW ENTRY PROGRAM (MREP)

1. PURPOSE

The Health Services Research and Development (HSR&D) Service Merit Review Entry Program (MREP) is an intramural research career development program designed to increase the capacity of non-clinician investigators with doctoral degrees conducting health services research in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The MREP is a 3-year, non-renewable, mentored award intended to provide beginning doctoral-level non-clinicians interested in health services research an opportunity for a period of concentrated mentoring and research activities designed to prepare them to enter the more competitive VA HSR&D Merit Review Program. The program goal is to help applicants develop their skills so they can successfully compete as independent investigators in VA Merit Review or other national programs. MREP awards provide up to three years of salary support. Doctoral-level non-clinicians include investigators with Title 5 appointments with degrees comparable to a PhD who have functioned and plan to continue functioning in a non-clinical capacity. PhD nurses, PharmDs, clinical psychologists and others with a doctorate in a clinical discipline must provide evidence that they are not employed in a clinical role.

2. BACKGROUND

The success rate of VA Merit Review funding for first-time applicants is significantly lower than for more seasoned investigators. In addition, the pool of new first-time applicants at the assistant professor and instructor levels has diminished over the past several years. The HSR&D MREP was designed to recruit and retain non-clinician investigators who seek to develop a research career at VA.

3. SCOPE

a. Applicant Requirements and Restrictions.

- (1) Applicants need not be VA employees at the time they apply, but are expected to maintain a minimum 5/8ths VA paid appointment upon receipt of award. Full-time VA appointments are preferred.
- (2) MREP appointees must meet the eligibility requirements for non-clinician investigators as described in VHA Handbook 1200.15 (Eligibility for VA Research Support Handbook).
- (3) The applicant may have an academic appointment at the Instructor or Assistant Professor

level, but may not be an Associate Professor. In unusual circumstances, a letter requesting an exception may be included in the application package.

(4) Candidates may be no more than 5 years beyond receipt of their Ph.D. or last research training or fellowship at the time of application. Applicants with more extensive research experience, but who have recently changed fields of study, will be considered on a case-by-case basis and must include a letter requesting an exception.

(5) Applicants must demonstrate potential for developing an independent VA research career, and must be first author of at least one research publication in a peer-reviewed journal or contributing author on multiple publications.

(6) The MREP is not intended for independent investigators. Applicants who have been principal investigator of any large national-level peer-reviewed grant comparable to VA's Merit Review programs, or whose total salary support as principal investigator of small, non-mentored research projects exceeds 30%, are not eligible for MREP funding. In most cases, current or former recipients of mentored awards designed to lead to independent research careers are ineligible for MREP awards.

(7) MREP recipients are expected to compete for HSR&D Merit Review funding and funding from other national programs during the term of their awards.

(8) Non-clinician recipients of Associate Investigator awards are eligible to apply for MREP awards.

b. Salary, Effort, and Scientific Support.

(1) MREP appointments may not exceed the GS-13 level.

(2) HSR&D will pay up to the full VA salary (must be 5/8th minimum) for any individual awarded an MREP. If any portion of the awardee's salary is paid by an HSR&D project and the awardee plans to continue on the project, HSR&D will withdraw the awardee's salary from that project. A revised budget must then be submitted to the HSR&D Service reflecting that the awardee's effort is contributed. Alternatively, the project principal investigator may choose to hire another individual to replace the MREP awardee, in which case the salary support for those functions will continue to be funded. It is the responsibility of the office of the Associate Chief of Staff for Research and Development (ACOS/R&D) to advise the HSR&D Service of any changes affecting career development awards and research funding. Failure to provide an accurate statement of an awardee's role on any project or to present a revised budget to the HSR&D Service so that funds may be adjusted in a timely manner may result in termination of the MREP award.

(3) HSR&D MREP awards are non-renewable, and an investigator may receive only one MREP award during his or her entire VA career.

c. **Location of Primary Work Site.**

HSR&D MREP awardees are expected to conduct all research under the MREP award at VA facilities.

4. PROCEDURES

a. **Procedure.** Each potential applicant must submit an application, prepared in accordance with instructions outlined in Appendix A.

b. **Mentors.** Mentors play a vital role in preparing MREP awardees for independent research careers. Applicants must identify a primary mentor with similar interests who is committed to the applicant's VA career development. In most cases, the primary mentor will be a senior VA HSR&D investigator. However, where local HSR&D resources and expertise are not available within VA, applicants may identify an off-site mentor with health services research expertise and appropriate qualifications to serve as primary mentor. In these cases, at least one VA investigator must participate as a mentor, and it must be clear that the applicant intends to build a VA-based research career. Up to 2 additional VA or non-VA mentors may supplement the expertise of the primary mentor. Participation of VA Career Scientist awardees as mentors is strongly encouraged.

(1) The MREP application should be written by the applicant in consultation with the mentor(s) and should demonstrate convincingly the potential of the applicant for achieving independent status during the course of the award.

(2) Applications must contain a letter of support from each proposed mentor documenting his or her specific commitment to the applicant and describing a program of skills acquisition and mentoring that will lead to the applicant's independence. Note: The content of the Mentor's letter is described in Appendix A.

c. **MREP review and evaluation.** MREP applications will undergo peer review by an expert panel composed of VA clinician and non-clinician scientists, but will be considered for funding separately.

(1) In addition to scientific and relevance review, applications are evaluated for the qualifications of the applicant and mentor(s), appropriateness of the applicant's VA appointment, suitability of the proposed development program, and suitability of the medical center for the work proposed.

(2) Decisions regarding MREP proposals are not subject to appeal.

d. **MREP Contract.** As a condition of the MREP award, all awardees will contractually agree to acknowledge VA as their primary affiliation on all public reports and presentations, conduct research in a VA medical center (unless specifically exempted), comply with VA policies regarding intellectual property disclosure obligations and ownership rights resulting from this work, and participate in an annual MREP progress review. Failure of a MREP

awardee to acknowledge VA support or employment may, at the discretion of the Chief Research & Development Officer, result in termination of the award. A sample contract is provided as Appendix C.

e. **Award Transfers.** The Director, HSR&D Service may, in exceptional circumstances, approve a request to transfer a MREP award to a VA medical center different from that originally proposed. Such approval will only be given if an appropriate mentor is identified at the new medical center and if the transfer is in the best interest of both the awardee's research career and the VA research program at the new site. No MREP transfers will be permitted before at least one year of work has been completed. All transfer requests must be endorsed by the Director of the new facility and provide evidence that the proposal has been reviewed and approved by the relevant VA committees and subcommittees. No funds will be released until all committee approvals have been documented. The request must ensure that sufficient space and support will be available for the successful completion of the transferee's award. Letters from each new mentor and a revised mentoring plan must accompany the request. Research funds will not be provided to cover any moving or relocation expenses. If approved, the awardee may complete the balance of the award at the new VA medical center.

f. **Change in Mentor Status.** If the primary mentor relocates to a different facility, or becomes unavailable to guide the awardee, the ACOS for R&D must immediately notify the HSR&D Service and request approval of a new primary mentor.

g. **Annual Progress Review.**

Awards are reviewed annually to ensure that awardees are making satisfactory progress toward independence. Note: Instructions for preparation and submission of the Annual Progress Review are described in Appendix B.

Stephan D. Fihn, MD, MPH
Acting Chief Research and Development Officer

INSTRUCTIONS FOR PREPARATION AND SUBMISSION OF HSR&D MREP APPLICATIONS

1. OVERVIEW

The HSR&D MREP proposal consists of a (1) four-page (excluding references) description of the research that would constitute the applicant's primary project, and (2) a three-page narrative discussing subsequent projects and collaborations, a plan of research productivity and mentoring that will lead to independence by the end of the award period, and how the applicant will be transitioned into the local VA research environment. Text must be letter-quality print of at least 11-point font with no more than 15 characters per inch and no more than 6 lines per inch. Page margins must be a minimum of 1 inch at each edge.

2. POLICY

a. This Appendix contains detailed instructions for preparation and submission of applications for HSR&D MREP awards.

b. Applications must be complete upon arrival in Veterans Affairs (VA) Central Office. Applications may be returned without review if received late, if any required components are missing, or if they do not follow formatting instructions. The responsibility for a complete and timely submission lies with the R&D Office at the originating VA medical center.

3. GENERAL REVIEW CRITERIA

HSR&D MREP applications are evaluated on the following criteria:

- a. Quality and appropriateness of the plan to advance the applicant's success as an independent HSR&D investigator;
- b. The applicant's prior research training and competence relevant to health services research (e.g., participation in research projects, graduate level courses, post-graduate training);
- c. Qualifications and commitment of the proposed parties to serve as effective mentor(s);
- d. Compatibility of the applicant's background with stated research and career plans;
- e. Appropriateness of the sponsoring medical center for the applicant's proposed research and development;
- f. Anticipated effect of the potential award on the applicant's VA research career;
- g. Quality of the proposed research, including the appropriateness of the conceptual framework and methodology; and

- h. Relevance of applicant's research interests to the needs of VA.

4. PREPARATION

The MREP application should be prepared jointly with the mentor and must contain the following materials:

- a. **VA Form 10-0102, VHA Career Development Application cover page.** In block 10, type "HSR&D MREP." Place this page first. NOTE: Form 10-0102 is available on the Web at www.va.gov/forms/medical/SearchList.asp.

- b. **(If this is a Revised Application): Response Letter.** A cover letter, not exceeding three pages, should address changes made in response to previous reviewers' comments. Changes should be indicated in the narrative by italics.

- c. **Research Plan (limit 4 pages, excluding references).** The narrative should discuss the applicant's proposed research and plan for development under the MREP. It should include a description (2 to 3 pages) of the primary project proposed, followed by subsequent goals, proposed collaborations, and expected research products. The applicant's primary project should be a VA HSR&D Merit Review project, and awardees are expected to have submitted a proposal to the HSR&D Service by the second year of their award. A specific timeline for letters of intent, proposals and other steps the applicant would take for achieving independent funding by the end of the award period should also be discussed. The research description is evaluated with consideration to the candidate's level of experience and training, the appropriateness and expertise of the candidate's primary mentor, and the resources of the local research and academic environment.

- d. **Mentoring and Career Plan (limit 3 pages).** The applicant should articulate his or her research and career interests and how the training and mentoring plan will help him or her achieve the goal of becoming an independent investigator. The narrative will be evaluated, based on the following criteria:

- (1) The applicant's prior training and involvements.
- (2) The applicant's research interests and short- and long-term goals.
- (3) The applicant's career objectives at both the VA and affiliate institution.
- (4) The current or planned participation in activities at the VA (e.g., teaching, serving on local or national committees).
- (5) The qualifications and specific roles of the proposed mentors, their relationship with the applicant, and the overall mentoring plan.

- e. **Nominating Letters.**

(1) HSR&D requires a nominating letter from the VAMC Director documenting approval of the application.

(2) A single, co-signed letter (or two separate letters) is also required from the Dean's Committee and the Research and Development Committee, documenting their support of the nomination.

f. **Description of Facilities.** Research conducted under the HSR&D MREP must take place at the applicant's sponsoring VA facility. Describe pertinent resources, including equipment available to the applicant and, if applicable, available clinical facilities. Identify existing core programs at the facility and describe opportunities for collaboration.

g. **Mentor's Support Letter.** Each proposed mentor must include a letter of support. Each letter is to describe the applicant's proposed research training experience from the mentor's point of view and to include:

(1) Description of the distribution of the mentor's time commitment to research, patient care, teaching and administration;

(2) Description of the mentor's current obligations, including the number of residents, fellows and other trainees s/he currently supervises in research as well as past and projected trainees, with inclusive dates; and

(3) Detailed description of the planned development experience, the role of the applicant in the mentor's research, role of the mentor in the applicant's research, and nature of the mentor's interaction with the applicant. Include hours per week that the mentor will devote to the applicant and the extent and nature of expected interaction between the applicant and other researchers at the medical center.

h. **ACOS for R&D Support Letter.** The Associate Chief of Staff (ACOS) for Research & Development (R&D) is required to submit a letter of support and to state his or her commitment to review the applicant's progress and development at least annually subsequent to receipt of the MREP award.

i. **Reference Letters.** Include reference letters from three professional colleagues with knowledge of the applicant's skills and abilities. These letters should not come from proposed mentors, but from former professors or others who have guided the applicant previously. (Evidence of support from individuals at institutions external to the applicant's host facility is helpful.)

j. **Attachments.**

(1) A copy of the applicant's current curriculum vitae (CV) with bibliography. The CV should clearly identify the applicant's VA appointment (paid or WOC) if one currently exists.

(2) A copy of each mentor's current CV. The CV should clearly identify the mentor's VA appointment if one currently exists.

(3) A statement from the local Human Resource Department indicating that the applicant can be hired by the VA medical center.

k. **Supplemental Materials.** Applicants may submit one or two publications or manuscripts representative of their best work. Include six copies of each reprint, collated into sets separate from the proposal. Videotapes, CD-ROMs, bound materials and books should not be submitted.

5. ISSUES TO CONSIDER

a. The primary mentor should take an active role in the development of the application. (Inadequate evidence of input and review by the mentor is a common problem in unsuccessful applications.)

b. HSR&D MREP awardees are expected to submit a HSR&D Merit Review project as principal investigator by the second year of their award. This project should be the primary focus of the research plan. Awardees are also encouraged to pursue additional VA and non-VA funding as well. By the end of the MREP period, awardees are expected to be fully supported by research projects and local funding.

c. Collaborations should not impede the candidate's independent growth, and the candidate's role in all proposed research should be clearly described.

d. The proposed research should reflect awareness of any ethical issues. (MREP awardees are expected to complete annual ethics training.)

6. DUE DATES

HSR&D reviews MREP applications semiannually. Application deadlines are the 15th of June and December (or, should the 15th fall on a weekend, the next business day).

7. SUBMISSION

Send the original and 10 double-sided copies to the address below. The original should be clearly marked and enclosed in a separate folder. Use staples or binder clips to separate copies (not rubber bands, paperclips, butterfly clips or colored pages). DO NOT use foam peanuts or shredded paper as packing material.

Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
HSR&D Service (124D)
Career Development Program
VA Central Office
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

INSTRUCTIONS FOR SUBMISSION OF HSR&D MREP ANNUAL PROGRESS REVIEW

1. POLICY

a. HSR&D requires a formal evaluation of the progress of each HSR&D MREP awardee, to be reviewed annually. The review emphasizes the awardee's adherence to the approved training program, interactions with mentors, research progress, and research plans for the coming year. Annual reviews must be performed by the Associate Chief of Staff for Research and Development (ACOS/R&D) or by a scientist(s) appointed by the Research Office at the host facility. The review will be based on information provided by the awardee, input received from the awardee's mentor(s), and observations made by the reviewer.

b. The HSR&D Service will determine whether the progress and activities planned are satisfactory. Awardees with unsatisfactory reviews may be placed on probation and risk termination of their MREP award. A decision to terminate will be final and is not subject to appeal.

2. REQUIRED COMPONENTS

Each annual performance review should consist of the following materials:

a. VHA Form 10-1314 "Annual Progress Report" covering the period since the last review. This form is the same form used for HSR&D Career Development annual review and evaluations. It requests information about specific training activities, time commitments, interactions with mentor(s) and other researchers, research projects, changes to career development plan, special accomplishments, publications, and presentations. For a copy of VHA Form 10-1314, contact the HSR&D Health Science Specialist for Career Development.

b. Mentor Letter(s). Attach a letter from each mentor containing the following information:

(1) Identification of any changes from the award application in the distribution of the mentor's time in research, patient care, teaching, and administration (if there are no changes, so state);

(2) Identification of any changes from the award application to the mentor's current obligations, including the number of residents, fellows and other trainees whom the mentor is currently supervising as well as projected trainees (if there are no changes, so state); and

(3) Description of mentor's interactions with the awardee during the performance period, including the awardee's role in the mentor's research program, the mentor's role in the awardee's research program; formal training completed, percentage of each mentor's time devoted to the awardee, and the nature and quality of interactions with the awardee.

(4) Description of any changes to the awardee's development plan identified during the performance period.

(5) Description of progress on the awardee's proposed research. Discuss any changes from the approved research plan.

c. Up-to-date curriculum vitae of awardee

d. Abstract(s) of current or pending LOIs, CPs, proposals, and/or projects

e. (OPTIONAL) Awardee Response to the Local Evaluation. If the local evaluation identifies problems or areas needing improvement, the awardee may provide a written response including a plan for addressing these.

3. DUE DATE

Performance reviews are due to the HSR&D Service annually starting with the twelfth month from the start date of the award. Send all required materials to HSR&D at the address provided in Appendix A of this Handbook.

HSR&D MERIT REVIEW ENTRY PROGRAM (MREP)
AWARDEE CONTRACT

I hereby acknowledge that I have been informed of Health Services Research and Development Service (HSR&D) policy regarding the responsibilities of HSR&D Merit Review Entry Program (MREP) awardees. In accepting this award, I agree to acknowledge the Department of Veterans Affairs as my primary affiliation on all publications and presentations and to comply with all HSR&D annual reporting requirements. In addition, I will participate in an annual progress review, carried out by the Office of Research and Development at my VA Medical Center and forwarded to HSR&D at VA Headquarters for approval. Failure to comply with the conditions of this award will result in immediate cancellation and withdrawal of funds, and may jeopardize my eligibility to compete for future HSR&D funding.

Signature of Awardee

Date

Name (print)

Signature of ACOS/ Research and Development

Date